

The Clone Wars: The Pengalan Tradeoff

By Aaron Allston; illustration by Tommy Lee Edwards

The *bang* beneath his feet was strong enough to bounce Joram Kithe up onto his tiptoes. He came down off-balance and was afraid that he'd pitch out the open starboard side of the gunship, onto the rocky terrain rolling by at 500 kilometers an hour. But the vehicle's inertial compensator kept its grip on him, restoring his balance.

Joram glanced at the other men in the troop hold. Most were staring out the starboard access. There weren't as many as there had been four hours ago, when the gunship, part of the complement of the assault ship *Sea Legacy*, had set down on Pengalan IV. Then, they'd been a full platoon -- plus Joram. Now, there were perhaps 15 left, men with heat-scarred clone trooper armor, expended ammunition clips, injuries ranging from minor to life threatening.

Not that they complained. Clone troopers didn't complain. At least, they didn't in the presence of observers.

The platoon's lieutenant, his armor distinguished by the blue stripes of his rank, leaned back through the hatch that led into the forward compartments. His voice crackled through Joram's headset. Joram pressed the headset tighter to his ears; he was in civilian dress, so he didn't have a helmet to cut down on the sound made by the wind.



"Our comlink is damaged," the lieutenant said. "*Sea Legacy* is still not receiving us. But we're receiving them. We'll reach them in time for extraction."

"What was that last bang?" Joram asked.

"Missile impact from a ground station." The lieutenant's tone suggested that he was unconcerned. "The warhead didn't detonate. The pilot says the impact changed our performance characteristics. Either an engine is failing or the missile is still protruding from our underside, increasing drag."

"Wonderful."

Scuttlebutt aboard *Sea Legacy* had it that the last transmission of a Republic Intelligence agent on Pengalan IV reported that Count Dooku's Confederacy was set up here, manufacturing experimental diamond boron missiles designed to shoot down Republic starfighters. These missiles could tip the balance of power toward the Confederacy in this new war. *Sea Legacy's* sensors had shown a long-decommissioned manufacturing plant, the world's most significant industrial site, to be operational, its furnaces fired up and internal machinery working... and its exterior protected by shield projectors that were distinctly inappropriate for a civilian industry. So, four hours ago, the assault ship had set down on the planet's surface and its scores of gunships had deployed toward the facility.

The platoon Joram was assigned to was one of the advance forces. Its gunship had set down within walking distance of the facility an hour before dawn. The platoon, separated into squadrons, had gone on foot to the plant, silently scouted the site, found the points where the overlapping shields gapped to allow plant workers easy access, and communicated its findings to the rest of the troops. Demolitions experts from an engineering unit had arrived and crept into the site, planting their explosives, getting clear, setting them off--

Certainly, the shields had gone down. Certainly, the Republic gunships had roared in to finish the job. But everything had gone wrong.

The shields had sprung to life again. Joram, from his position of relative safety near the gunship, had watched in disbelief as missiles and turret lasers had stopped mid-flight, blunted by shimmering air. The foremost gunships, too close to maneuver, had crashed into those energy barriers, crumpling or exploding.

Joram, although no soldier, hadn't needed a military advisor to grasp what was happening. The shield projectors destroyed by the engineers had been secondary projector terminals slaved to complete units elsewhere on the facility. It was a trap, and the trap was fully sprung when the pair of Geonosian-built corvettes -- bronze-skinned, with a pointed prow split like a set of tweezers, characteristic of the Geonosian engineers -- rose from one of the world's numerous canyons and opened fire. Trade Federation droid starfighters had roared in, strafing.

It had been a slaughter. Gunship after gunship had gone down.

In the Republic forces' retreat, Joram had seen acts of bravery and skill he considered extraordinary. Some of the combat engineers who had destroyed the false shield projectors had penetrated deeper into the facility; before being killed, they reported that there were no missile fabrication systems here, just machinery made active to provide distant sensors with a suspicious signal to detect. Gunship pilots had swooped down to make daring rescues of clone troopers. Whole units remained behind to provide covering fire for escaping craft. The retreat was not as orderly as the approach had been, but it was nearly as efficient.

Ironically, Joram's personal mission had been a success. He'd seen the troops operating at the height of chaos and had found them to be courageous and effective, everything the Republic could hope for in its new army. He thought he had enough data for his report.

Another impact hurled Joram upward. This time he crashed into the ceiling of the troop bay and was held there, sharp pain cracking through his head. In his peripheral vision, he saw the aftmost portion of the bay filled with blinding brightness that consumed the trio of clone troopers who had been standing there.

The landscape outside the starboard access was rotating, a dizzying vision like something from an amusement facility's thrill ride. Distantly, dimly, he heard someone shout, "Eject! Eject!" "Negative, we can bring it in--" "Initiating uncontrolled touchdown procedures." Finally, most ominous of all: "Brace for impact."

* * *

Joram awoke with the sun in his eyes.

It seemed that all his 80 kilos of mass had just spent hours being tenderized by a chef. Where he didn't ache, he cramped, and his first, foolish attempt to sit up caused his back to arch in a spasm that nearly made him black out again.

"Civilian's awake."

"Good."

Joram didn't know which clone was speaking; he couldn't recognize their voices. Actually, that wasn't true -- but they all had the same voice. They pitched their voices differently for different situations -- louder and deeper when exerting authority or dominance, quieter when acknowledging orders, a sort of bland neutrality when seeking to conceal their thoughts -- but every one of them sounded the same.

Joram merely grunted, and as the spasm ebbed, he tried again to sit up, this time using his arms for support. It worked and he came upright.

Forty meters or so ahead of him lay the ruins of the gunship. Once a long boxy thing with stabilizing wings, it now looked like something a giant had drunk from and then crumpled into a loose ball. It lay at the bottom of a cliff, and Joram could see a corresponding cliff about half a kilometer to his left. They'd crashed into one of Pengalan's numberless canyons.

He could see living clone troopers nearby, at the wreckage, and beyond. Joram counted six of them. Good. He could still count. Counting was what he was good at. The troopers had laid out the bodies of their fellows in a straight line only a few steps from where Joram sat. Some of the survivors were picking among the gunship ruins; others were ranging farther down the canyon or using field shovels to dig graves nearby.

The gravediggers had their helmets off, revealing identical features -- dark, brooding, dangerous-looking. Joram had been put off by their looks until he'd realized just how passive most of them were when not engaged in battle. "What's our situation, Trooper?" Joram asked the nearest.

The trooper straightened from his task. He was a moment in replying. The clone troopers always seemed to take a moment when answering Joram, or any civilian.

"Seven of us still alive," the trooper answered. "Plus you. One has damage that will limit his mobility. The gunship's a loss. All weapons systems out. Repulsorlifts inoperable. Speeder bikes wrecked. Medical droid destroyed."

"Or so we think," the other gravedigger corrected. "We can't get to the compartment where it was stowed, but it was pretty thoroughly crushed."

Joram managed to get to his feet and stood on wobbly legs. "Is *anything* still working?"

Both men nodded in unison. "The inertial compensator," said the first one. "It can still run off battery power. It's what kept us alive during the crash. And during the roll down the cliff." With his shovel, he gestured up the cliffside. Fifty meters up there was a clear burn mark to indicate where the gunship had hit.

"Did the lieutenant make it?"

The first gravedigger shook his head.

"Who's in charge, then?"

Both troopers shook their heads. "We're still working that out, sir. There are only privates left. The procedures say that the oldest has seniority, but we're all the same age. We then default to the trooper with the highest educational level, but no one has a clear advantage there."

The second gravedigger summed up: "So we drew strands."

The first gravedigger turned to Joram. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

The trooper held his shovel out to Joram, handle first. "Then dig."

Joram frowned. "I don't think so."

The trooper smiled. "All of us are banged up, so you can't opt out on account of physical condition. We're military, and you're a civilian, so under these circumstances you're attached to us in an inferior capacity. Dig."

Joram reached under his tunic and pulled out the object held on the chain around his neck. It was an oversized locket bearing the Republic insignia--a symbol like a cross-section of a gear with eight sprockets, surrounded by a dotted line. Joram popped it open and presented the datacard held within it. On the card's surface was a holo of Joram's face; below that were lines of information. "Sorry, guys. I'm temporarily a lieutenant with Republic Intelligence. Meaning I can opt out on account of rank."

Both troopers snapped to a salute. The one who'd been holding out his shovel dropped it and winced as it hit the ground.

"Uh, as you were, I guess." Joram waited until the second gravedigger retrieved his shovel. "So which one is the guy in charge?"

The first digger gave him a curious look. "That would be you, sir."

"Uh, no. This identicard just means I'm outside your command structure."

"No, sir. You're a military officer. We're a military unit without an officer. That puts you in charge. That's procedure."

"Great." Joram heaved a sigh. "Back to my original question. Which one of you was in charge until just a moment ago?"

* * *

They summoned another trooper, indistinguishable from the rest, and at Joram's request, he explained their situation. "The *Sea Legacy* has to have lifted, sir, so we're stranded on Pengalan IV. Procedure gives us two branching paths to choose between. The goal of the first is surrender; the second is escape. I was going to set us down the escape path."

"I like the sound of that," Joram said. "I'm a career coward. So what do procedures dictate that we do?"

"Step One: Destroy any materiel we don't want to fall into enemy hands. I've got one of the men rigging a warhead in the wreckage now. Step Two: Time allowing, bury our dead." The trooper nodded toward the line of graves. "Step Three: Get clear of pursuit. Step Four: Signal our command structure. Since we can't, we go down a new branch. Step Four-Sub-One: Get to a transportation center and acquire a means to rejoin our unit."

Joram nodded. "Pretty straightforward. How soon is pursuit likely to get to us, and how far is it to the nearest transportation center?"

"Pursuit, unknown. I have a trooper at the cliff top with a pair of macrobinoculars watching for incoming vehicles. Distance, about a hundred kilometers back to the assault site, which is likely to be loaded with unfriendlies, and a little more, about a hundred and twenty clicks, to the nearest inhabited community, Tur Lorkin."

Joram thought about that. "Let's say we chose Tur Lorkin. That's still three or four days marching through hot, difficult terrain."

"More than that, sir, unless we sacrifice our injured man. Let him be captured or put him down ourselves. He can't walk."

"Put him down." Joram winced at the cold-blooded terminology. "How do you feel about the prospect of putting him down, Trooper?"

The trooper looked uneasy. "If we have to, it's his duty, and ours, sir. But we won't do it if we don't have to. If we don't, though, it doubles our travel time."

"I have an idea," Joram said. And he described it.

The trooper frowned. "Sir, that's not approved procedure."

* * *

Joram lay in the shade under an overhang of rock, peering down at the wreckage of the gunship. He held a clone trooper blaster rifle.

He wished he could have appropriated a set of trooper armor, too, but he was centimeters taller than the troopers, narrower in the shoulders, leaner overall. Even his face was leaner and more angular, with features that were friendlier, less intimidating. The form-fitted trooper armor would chafe in some directions, be loose in others, and make him awkward while walking.

Below, all signs that there had been survivors from the crash had been erased -- all but the presence of a clone trooper, backing away from the wreckage, using a handful of vegetation to erase the footprints he'd left in the sand-like canyon soil. But that trooper had reactivated the wreckage's inertial compensator, a power surge that nearby Confederacy sensors might be able to detect.

The shallow graves had been smoothed over by the gravediggers. The armor belonging to the dead, now empty, was strewn about the wreckage site, indistinguishable at more than a few dozen meters from bodies thrown clear of a crashing gunship.

The trooper who had briefly led the survivors of this unit lay beside Joram. Joram cleared his throat to ask a question, then thought better of it. He'd meant to ask, "What's your name?" But clone troopers didn't have names, just alphanumeric designations. Come to think of it, how was Joram supposed to keep straight which trooper was which?

"Trooper," Joram said, "it's time for you and the others to have nicknames."

The trooper looked at him suspiciously. "Sir, nicknames aren't procedure--"

"Oh, yes, they are. They're *unofficial* procedure. Besides, following orders is procedure, and I'm ordering you to come up with a nickname for yourself. Then you and I are going to come up with nicknames for the others."

The trooper opened his mouth. Joram, knowing what he was about to say, shot him a look -- he didn't want to hear "But that's not procedure" again. The trooper shut his mouth again.

After several minutes, during which slow, strong winds rustled along the canyon top and spilled sand down the cliff slopes, the trooper asked, "What is a nickname supposed to be like?"

"Well, usually it points to one of your features that is distinctive, or some event from your past that is more about you than anyone else. What is unique about you?"

"I lost a tooth once." He opened his mouth wide and pointed at an upper molar. It looked no different from the corresponding molar on the other side. "They fixed it, but it was out for a while. One of my platoon mates struck me harder than he meant to in hand-to-hand combat training and out it came."

"Well, that's something. Now you can be Tooth. See?"

"I see. Tooth." The trooper probed at the restored molar with his tongue. "If I may ask, sir..."

"Go ahead."

"What's *your* nickname?"

"Well, I've had several. Most recently, Dodge."

"Because that was your greatest proficiency in martial training?"

"No, because my greatest proficiency has always been in getting out of work assignments."

"Oh." Tooth frowned, thinking that over.

Mentally, Joram kicked himself. That sort of admission, which entertained most people, probably wouldn't go over too well with this unit of hard-working soldiers.

A stone fell past his place of concealment and hit the soil below. It was followed by another, then a third, at quick regular intervals.

Tooth pulled his helmet on. Joram moved handfuls of vegetation -- dry, root-like tangles recently harvested from another part of the canyon wall -- in front of them, concealing the two of them.

The three rocks were a signal from the clone trooper atop the cliff, who should now be concealing himself just as Joram and Tooth were. Joram had expressly forbidden use of comlinks while they were at this site; their use might be detected.

For another few minutes Joram and Tooth lay silent. The wind above kicked more sand down on the canyon floor, sometimes sending little streams of it past their place of concealment.

Finally Joram heard a faint roar, and a figure mounted on a flying apparatus rode into view from the left -- the west. The figure was spindly and distorted in comparison with human proportions, and the device it rode was similarly spare -- it consisted of a vertical housing, obviously kept aloft by a combination of repulsorlifts and thrusters, with brackets for the feet, handlebars for the hands, forward-mounted blasters, and not much else, not even a seat or windscreen. This was the Single Trooper Aerial Platform, or STAP, designed for use by Trade Federation battle droids. Joram doubted a human being could even fly the thing.

Its operator was a battle droid, the sort Joram had seen in the holos, with a head like a drooping game fowl bill, a short-barreled blaster weapon held by a sling to its back. It stopped the STAP 20 meters from the gunship's wreckage and dismounted, leaving the thing hovering there. It advanced toward the nearest set of empty clone trooper armor, its billhead turning from side to side.

The battle droid deliberately aimed and fired a single blast into the faceplate of the clone trooper helmet. The blast burned through. A plume of black smoke rose from the helmet. Methodically, the droid aimed at the other figures lying near the wreckage and fired at each; its blasts battered and blackened the empty suits of armor.

Satisfied, the droid advanced on the gunship. A moment later, Joram heard the drone of more oncoming craft. More droid-operated STAPs roared in from the west -- 10, by Joram's quick count, two units of five flanking a lumbering, disk-shaped airspeeder at least four meters in diameter.

Joram smiled. Here was transport they could actually use.

The STAPs stopped near the one left by the advance scout and their riders dismounted. The droid operating the airspeeder set it down nearby. It did not leave its vehicle, but did stand to obtain better visibility, and held its blaster at the ready.

Joram could feel Tooth's gaze on him. Joram had made it absolutely clear that no trooper was to fire before he did, and now was the time.

He checked his blaster rifle to make sure that its safety mechanism was disengaged. Carefully, he moved the vegetation aside so he could move forward a few more centimeters. He aimed at the droid nearest, but not on, the speeder, and pulled the trigger.

His blaster bolt hit the sand next to the droid, missing by a handful of centimeters.

But a fraction of a second later, seven more bolts leaped out from the clone troopers' positions of concealment -- vegetation-shrouded stands of rocks, the top of the cliff, mounds of sand as artfully draped as any child's sand citadel, and precisely-placed chunks of gunship wreckage. Seven battle droids exploded into irredeemable trash in that instant, including the one on the airspeeder, hit expertly from the side by one of the troopers half-buried in sand.

The other five battle droids spun, brought up their weapons, sought out targets -- and clone trooper blasts converged on them. The five droids were torn to metallic shreds, parts of them bouncing across the canyon floor.

Joram let out a thoroughly unmilitary whoop.

* * *

The airspeeder, with Tooth at the controls, with Joram, the other troopers, and two STAPs piled into the back, rose into the air and headed eastward. Behind them, the wreckage of the gunship detonated as the warhead the troopers had activated finally counted down to zero. Chunks of metal flew up nearly the height of the cliffs, reached the apex of their flights, and descended as burning fireballs. "What now, sir?" Tooth asked. "Head to Tur Lorkin?"

"Close." Joram leaned back against the airspeeder's rail next to the controls. The speeder had no seats, but he could stretch out his legs and let the wind rush across him. "We need to keep to the canyons to make it harder for flyovers to spot us. Who's your navigator?"

The troopers, all with helmets off, exchanged looks.

"No navigator." Joram sighed. "Who has a working datapad with a planetary map?"

The most seriously injured trooper, whose broken leg had been braced and splinted, raised a hand.

"All right," Joram said. "You, plot us a route that will keep us in the canyons until we get as close as possible to Tur Lorkin. When we get there, we'll bounce out of the canyon, hide this speeder, and wait until dark. By the way, your nickname is now Mapper. Don't forget it." He closed his eyes.

"Excuse me, sir," Tooth said. "Procedure says we need to find the most *efficient* route to our destination and travel that way."

Joram nodded. "Listen, I'm not going to kid you. I'm not a military expert, and you are. But some of the stuff I've heard from real Intelligence people says the enemy knows a *lot* about the clone troopers, which to me suggests that they probably know your procedures, too. So what does that mean?"

Tooth was silent for a few moments, during which Joram just enjoyed the breeze blowing across his face. "That they might lie in wait for us on the most efficient route."

"Correct!"

"I see."

* * *

The Pengalan sun was higher now, reaching its noon zenith, and the troopers' stolen speeder was safely tucked away in a glade surrounded by tall tendril-plants. One of the troopers -- the first one Joram had spoken to upon awakening, now nicknamed Digger -- had gathered tendrils from several of the plants and stretched them over

the top of the speeder, tying them together to conceal the vehicle's presence from the air. Two troopers, Spots and Spade, were out at a distance of 30 meters or so, acting as guards. It was, according to Mapper, less than 50 clicks from Tur Lorkin.

Tooth paused over the rations he was eating. As soon as they'd set up temporary camp here, the troopers had broken out the meals, trays with heating elements at the bottom of each compartment. "If I might ask, sir--"

"Go ahead."

"You don't seem to have had any military training. Why were you attached to us as an observer?"

"You mean, what qualifies me to pass judgment on you, when I'm so obviously out of my depth?"

The other troopers grinned. Tooth merely said, "Something like that, sir."

"The Republic paid a lot of credits for you -- to create this clone army. That money is gone, but there are a lot of people in government who want to know if it was well-spent... and whether they ought to throw any more credits into the same program, to expand the clone ranks."

"I see. So you are --"

"An accountant. But I've been all over. I managed to persuade my doting, rich aunt Tagdel to support me in educational programs all over the Republic until she wised up and insisted that I start work, which is when she got me the appointment at the Department of Cost Accounting -- she's with the Ministry of Finance. I've been through the Airspeeders For Bodyguards and Security Specialists training course on Coruscant, the Success Through Charismatic Influence regimen on Commenor, Xenoecoengineering Financial Principles on Muun, Subaquatic Manufacturing Economies on Mon Cal--"

"Why so many places?" asked Digger. "Isn't one good enough?"

Joram thought about that. "I guess not. If a place isn't somehow yours, it's just not going to be good enough. My parents died in an airspeeder accident when I was three, and after that I was bounced around among all my other kin, so no place ever became home." He glanced among the troopers and found little comprehension on their faces. He knew the notion of parents, and what they meant to a child, was something the troopers had no perspective to appreciate. Even the notion of childhood was alien to them. "Guys, imagine that the war is really bad and every one of the troopers but you perishes. The only time you ever get to see that face is in the mirror. Wouldn't that be strange?"

They all nodded. "Yeah," said Digger. His tone was solemn.

"Well, that's kind of what it's like."

"Ever been to Kamino?" asked Mapper.

"No, I haven't."

"That's where we're from, Kamino. It's somehow ours."

"Yes, I know."

"Very rainy there."

"Yes, I know."

Tooth cleared his throat, silencing Mapper. "We're all curious about what sort of conclusions you came to."

"As in, were you worth the credits?"

"Yes, sir."

"I would say, very much so. Your calmness and courage under fire, your fighting skills, your physical resilience, and especially the way you coordinate things, each of you just knowing what the next is about to do... these are all very valuable traits. I'd say my review is very favorable. If you lack anything, it's..." A realization that he was about to say something counterproductive hit Joram, and he shut up.

If the troopers lacked anything, it was individuality, and an associated ability to think in nontraditional, nonlinear ways -- traits Joram valued very highly. But would individuality make them more valuable, or less?

Wouldn't it foul up these troopers' extraordinary unit coordination if they all thought a bit differently from one another?

And wouldn't that, in turn, make them less effective, less valuable to the Republic? It hit Joram that in pushing them to become more distinct, to think outside their beloved military procedures, he might just be sabotaging them. And in this war, that might actually constitute treason.

The troopers all stared at him, waiting for his next words. Mapper's spoon, dripping blue gravy, was poised halfway between his plate and his open mouth.

Joram forced a smile for them. "Come to think of it, you don't lack anything I can think of." The men relaxed, and Mapper's spoon continued its interrupted journey. "And since you men are exactly like all the other thousands of clone troopers, the Republic obviously has one magnificent army."

He'd thought the comment would be taken as a compliment, but the troopers froze and exchanged looks, communicating something that no one not sharing their DNA and training could interpret.

"What is it?" Joram asked.

Tooth returned his attention to Joram. "Nothing, sir."

"You're certain?"

The trooper was expressionless. "Yes, sir."

Joram sighed inwardly. He didn't like secrets. Other peoples' secrets, anyway. He couldn't imagine that these men, conditioned to obedience, would withhold something from him under these circumstances -- unless they were obeying previous orders. So he let it drop.

* * *

The macrobinoculars gave Joram a clear view of Tur Lorkin from the hilltop he and the troopers were now using as their base of operation.

The community was a small town, unwalled, most of its buildings being constructed from prefabricated or mold-blown permacrete painted in white or light blue. The buildings all looked to be of recent years' construction, well maintained. The largest buildings were a dome that appeared to house city government and a set of truncated domes sliding with doors on top -- the town's tiny spaceport. Joram placed the town population at a few hundred. Numbers automatically began to run through the back of his mind -- annual cost of the town's power requirements, estimated cost of consumable imports, value of the buildings that made up the community. He swept the macrobinoculars around, but again he saw no more distant lights, no sign of nearby communities or even outlying farms or ranches.

He passed the viewing device back to Tooth. "What do you think?"

The trooper stared down at the town. "I think it will be comparatively simple to get down in among the buildings. There's not much foot traffic. I wonder why?"

"Pretty typical for a small f--, uh, a small town." Joram had almost said "small farm community" before remembering that wasn't what this place was. "People in such places tend to starting work before dawn and then go to bed early."

"Oh."

Back at the airspeeder, concealed under vegetation at the bottom of the other side of the hill, Joram described the situation for the other troopers. "Who has the best infiltration skills?" he asked.

Mapper, of the splinted leg, raised his hand.

"Right. Well, I guess it will be Tooth and me. Wrench, how are the modifications coming?"

The trooper with the highest level of mechanical expertise looked up from the partially disassembled STAP he was working on. "I'm rigging a cable net to act as a sling so the pilot won't fall off. The modifications to the controls, so a human can pilot it, are almost done."

"Great."

"But are we going to need it, if we're just going to steal a transport and run?"

Joram shrugged. "I don't know. But both sides of my personality, the coward and the accountant, say that it's a good idea to maximize your resources whenever possible."

"Yes, sir. Maximize. Question, sir. What do we do if someone, one of the townsfolk, stumbles across this camp while you're gone?"

"You catch him, kill him, cook him, and eat him."

Wrench frowned. All the other troopers frowned. It was the same frown.

"Pardon me, sir," Tooth said. "Cannibalism is very definitely against procedures."

Joram snorted. "That was a joke."

Tooth shook his head. "That wasn't a joke. Nobody fell down."

Mapper shook his head. "Nobody said, 'What's the difference between . . .'"

Digger shook his head. "Nobody said, 'Three Separatists walk into a bar.'"

"Guys, guys, there are more types of jokes than the ones you're familiar with."

Tooth looked dubious. "If you say so, sir."

* * *

Joram and Tooth lay at the very edge of the tendril vegetation, a mere 20 meters from the nearest of Tur Lorkin's buildings. Tooth wore only his undersuit, a dark one-piece garment that would pass as a jumpsuit at a distance.

"Sir, I have a question."

Joram, macrobinoculars to his eyes, slowly swept his attention from light-post to light-post. He didn't see any sign that there were holocams or other surveillance devices on the posts. "Go ahead."

"Are you really a coward?"

"I think so, yes. Lazy, too. I try to avoid work, pain, and danger whenever possible. I'm willing to risk some loss of face by walking away from a fight instead of getting my guts stomped out to impress people. I prefer to be operated on while under anesthesia."

"But, logically, you're risking death with this mission. Whereas you could have avoided all danger by ordering us to surrender back at the crash site. Then you'd spend the rest of the war in prison, away from the fighting."

"Even cowards have goals, Tooth. How big or small a coward you are sort of depends on what you're willing to risk to accomplish your goals. One of my goals is to be free. To go where I want to go, to do what I want to do." A twinge of discomfort tugged at Joram. He was talking about personal freedom with someone who probably had no notion of the concept.

"What about duty, sir? Do you recognize duty?"

"I suppose I do. I could have tried to wriggle out of this assignment, and I didn't, even though my aunt didn't want me to go." He shrugged. "Part of freedom -- a civilian's freedom, anyway -- means being able to evaluate and choose the duties you acknowledge rather than just believing what someone tells you your duty is."

"You're talking about judgment."

"That's right."

"What happens when judgment and orders clash?"

"I don't know. I'm kind of new to orders. I guess you have to decide what's right, and take that as your goal, even if you know it's going to cause you trouble."

"Did you ever think that maybe you were chosen for this assignment because you *were* lazy?"

Joram frowned. He set aside the macrobinoculars to look at Tooth and tried to work through the answer to that question. "Meaning that, since someone was aware of my reputation, whoever chose me for the mission was counting on my laziness."

"Yes, sir."

"My conclusion was that the clone troopers were worth the credits spent. Well worth additional investment. Even if I *am* lazy, I think that's the correct conclusion. I don't think someone who works harder than I do would arrive at a different answer."

"I hope not, sir."

Tooth's idea bothered Joram, but he was pleased that Tooth had asked the question. It showed the man did have intellectual processes.

"I don't think there are any security cams. Let's move out."

* * *

Tooth took the lead, moving out surely and silently as a jungle predator. They reached the outmost town buildings without incident, and, by ducking down dirt alleys, staying in shadowy patches, and keeping alert for the rare pedestrian, they remained unseen across the hundred meters or so between them and the spacecraft bays.

They stood in an alley mouth directly opposite the entry door into the smallest of the bays. The area was poorly lit. Joram could barely see the oval of the door itself; beside it, a security keypad glowed. "Can you decode or bypass that?"

"I think so, sir. I'll have to look at it, but it appears to be a simple design."

"Why three bays?"

"What?" Tooth looked at him, puzzled.

"Why does a one-nerf town like this have three spacecraft bays? That means at least three spacecraft are here routinely. The town probably just needs one big bay for cargo vessels, for export of whatever it produces . . ."

The numbers running through the back of his mind moved to the front and he fell silent again.

"I don't understand, sir."

"This town has no evident industry. Its biggest buildings are the government center and the largest ship bay. There are no farms. No ranches. What purpose does the town serve?"

Tooth shrugged. "It's where the factory workers lived before the factory was shut down?"

"No. That factory was shut down a long time ago. Reactivated just to serve as bait for our assault. Its workers probably lived at the factory. All *these* buildings were built since it was deactivated. So, what is this town for? What's its economy?"

"It's been here too long just to have been built as a trap." Tooth looked around, eyes narrowed. "So it must have a secondary purpose. And if it has too many spacecraft facilities, the purpose probably has an offworld significance."

"Very good."

"The answer's going to be with the spacecraft. The biggest spacecraft. Let's go there instead."

* * *

The largest spacecraft bay was also the best-lit. With his new suspicions about this site, Joram wasn't anxious to have Tooth, who admitted to being technically competent but not a security expert, make an attempt at the security keypad at the bay's main access.

So they waited a long, tedious hour in nearby shadows and watched that access. Finally, two men in stained jumpsuits arrived on foot. One keyed in a lengthy access code.

As the doors slid open, Tooth and Joram leaped for them. Tooth, faster, hit the farther man in the jaw with the butt of his blaster rifle before the nearer man was even aware of his presence. The nearer man jumped away from Tooth, backing toward Joram, opening his mouth to shout -- and Joram drove the butt of his own rifle into the back of the man's head. The second worker hit the ground only a moment after the first.

Tooth and Joram dragged their respective victims inside, into darkness, and waited until the outer doors had slid shut again before switching on their personal glowrods.

This was a primitive spacecraft bay. The antechamber they'd entered was empty except for a few old foam seats and a caf dispenser, which was powered down. One secure door led into what had to be the bay's control chamber; a larger one led into what had to be the main hangar. There was a window into the hangar as well, but a blast plate behind it was in place, preventing anyone from looking in.

Joram looked over the door security while Tooth searched the prisoners. "Identicard slot and fingerprint scanner," Joram said. "On both doors."

"We have their identicards, and we have their fingers. We also have small blaster pistols, modern comlinks, a flask with some sort of alcohol."

Joram indicated the door into the control chamber. Tooth obligingly dragged one unconscious man over to it by the wrist. Joram inserted the identicard into the security slot while Tooth held the man's hand in place over the reader. The reader glowed and the door slid open. Both Joram and Tooth aimed their trooper rifles into the space beyond--but it was dark, unoccupied. They dragged their prisoners within.

It was a standard control chamber -- three seats allowing access to sensor and comm boards. A large window would provide a view into the bay, but it, too, was sealed behind a blast plate. Rather than open it, Joram switched on a holocam viewer labeled MAIN.

It snapped into instant focus, showing a nearly empty bay. The angle showed the closed observation window, and the floor was well below that, indicating that much of the bay was underground. The wide-open area was brightly lit, and vacuformed cargo containers were piled at the far end. As Joram watched, a man and a woman maneuvered a repulsorlift dolly into place and wrestled another pair of containers off it atop one stack. Then they retreated behind the stacks with their dolly.

Tooth finished binding and gagging the two unconscious prisoners. He moved to an unoccupied console seat.

"We've got holocams on the other two bays," Joram said, "which means that this is probably the main spacecraft control." He snapped the other holocam monitors on, then, as they snapped into focus, whistled at what he saw. Mo< One bay was occupied by a hammer-shaped Corellian transport, smaller than, but of the same general design as, the well-known Republic cruiser. Its hull was a neutral gray, puckered in places by mynock scars. But the other bay was occupied by a sleek, silver-reflective space yacht whose lines and obvious state of maintenance suggested speed. "We are in luck. Some proud owner is going to miss one of these ships."

"Both," Tooth said. He was now frowning over a comm board, reviewing screens of data. One of the prisoners' datacards occupied a security slot on the board. "We destroy the one we don't take. Procedure. Correct?"

"Correct... I suppose." Joram winced at the thought of the yacht being destroyed. "We could steal both. I can pilot one. Can any of you serve as pilots?"

"Wrench and I have gone through a set of simulator classes."

"Well, that may be enough."

"Sir, those containers on the monitor. They contain anti-starfighter missiles."

Joram moved to look over Tooth's shoulder. The screen of data there referred to a cargo of 128 test missiles -- type AS-X-DB. Anti-Starfighter, Experimental, he guessed. Diamond Boron.

He whistled again. "The spy's report wasn't a mistake, or a leak. There really is a facility here for making those things."

"Yes, sir."

"But there's no place on this rock that could produce them -- no place visible from orbit, anyway. Intelligence's orbital scans would have detected it. All they detected was the site we assaulted this morning. Which means

the facility is probably here, underground. The town exists to house its workers and to provide a cover for heat signatures and the like, So..."

"So," Tooth said, "they caught the spy in the act of transmitting. They realized they'd been found out. They fired up that old plant to draw in the forces they knew would be coming, and prepared it as a trap. They let us discover that it wasn't a missile plant so, once they'd kicked us in the teeth, we'd have no reason to come back here. They made us think the whole thing was just a trap, when it was really a cover-up."

Joram nodded. "All right. Here's the plan. We seize one or both of those transports, lift off, pick up the others, outrace whatever pursuit they send after us, get into space, and report to the Republic that they need to come back here and finish this place off."

"I don't think so, sir."

"What?" The edge in Tooth's voice had sounded suspiciously like defiance. Joram took a step to the side to give the man another look.

Tooth spun his chair around to face Joram. "Sir, if we leave and report, the Republic will have to evaluate our story. They'll question us, determine that we're telling the truth, plan a return, come back, and blow up this site. But in the meantime, the Separatists will know that their secret is out -- someone knocked out their workers and stole their transports, less than a day after the Republic assault. So while the planning and interrogating are going on, they're dismantling their plant, moving their stockpiles. Whatever gets blown up will be just what they left behind. The least important part of this facility."

"True." Joram offered Tooth an expression of sympathy. "So what are you saying?"

"We're not going."

Joram blinked. "Tooth, I'm getting kind of tired of saying 'What?' all the time."

"Yes, sir. I'll explain. I'm bringing in the men. We're going to blow this place up. Otherwise we've failed in our mission, which was to destroy the missile plant. Otherwise every one of us who died today died for no good reason."

Joram tapped his chest, where his locket lay under his tunic. "Have you forgotten something? Like, who's in charge here?"

"I haven't forgotten. If you don't agree with me, I'm going to have to... to *defy* your orders." Tooth looked as though the words he was saying had made him ill, but did not relent. "I can't give you orders. You can steal whichever of those ships you like and take off. But I'd like to ask you to wait until I bring the men in." He tapped the monitor where it showed the stacks of missile containers. "Somewhere behind those, there has to be an access to the plant. We'll go in there, taking some of those missiles, and blow everything up. Once we're inside, you can take off. Please don't order me not to do this. I'd hate for my last action as a clone trooper to be in direct violation of orders."

* * *

Half an hour later, the rest of the troopers except for the injured Mapper were in the antechamber.

Joram, out of the loop on the mission planning, stayed in the control chamber, methodically performing a remote warm-up on the yacht. He could hear Tooth struggling back into his armor as he briefed the troopers; a few snatches of the briefing were audible to Joram. The briefing turned into discussion, and then discussion turned into argument -- something he hadn't heard among the clone troopers in the days he'd been assigned to them. Surreptitiously, he moved to the door into the antechamber and listened.

"It's his right," one of them said. His voice was in dominant mode. It was probably Tooth. "I can't issue him orders."

"You can't issue *me* orders," said another. His voice, too, was in dominant mode. "And I say we ask him."

"Don't--"

Armored feet thudded toward the antechamber. Joram stepped out into view and confronted the trooper. The man's helmet was off and there was a rag tied around his forehead, red with white dots, so this was Spots. He reared back at seeing Joram so close, then recovered. "Lieutenant, I have to say something to you."

"Go ahead."

"I think you should come on this raid."

"Why?"

"To show you approve of it. We don't think you do. We're not sure what that means. And for another reason, a tactical one. You're the only one of us who doesn't look like us. We'd work better if we had someone moving in front of the main body as a scout. If the Separatists know as much about us as you say they do, they'd recognize any of us instantly."

"You'd give us a much better chance of success," said another. The burns on his cheek, from the crash, marked him as Hash.

"Let it go," Tooth said.

"Why aren't you with us, Lieutenant?" asked Digger.

Joram stared at the man. How did he know it was Digger? He just did.

He looked between the troopers. They weren't the same as they had been in the hour after the crash. Now, they were distinct, individual... but not united. How could they hope to pull off a raid against an unknown facility, against unknown opposition, if they weren't a cohesive unit?

To restore them to some sense of unity, all he had to do was join them. But just as soon as the raid began, Confederacy aerial support was likely to converge on Tur Lorkin. If he didn't take off before then, he'd be trapped here. Captured or killed.

"I'm with you," Joram said. He tried to keep sudden fear out of his voice. "But I'm not in charge. I seem to be back to being a civilian. This is Tooth's mission to lead." He turned away, hoping they hadn't seen his own expression change... for he was sure he now looked as uncertain and mournful as they had a moment ago.

* * *

The door at the back of the main hangar -- not an obvious door, just an anonymous section of wall -- slid aside, revealing two men and their repulsorlift dolly, once more loaded with missile containers. Beyond them, a dimly lit corridor stretched onward and downward.

Joram didn't wait. Now wearing the jumpsuit of one of the captured men, with a billed cap pulled low over his features, Joram pushed his way past the cargo wranglers, ignoring them.

"Hey!" The men turned after him. "Are you coming on duty?"

Then there were thuds, painful-sounding impacts of rifle butts on flesh. Joram heard the men fall. He looked back and waited.

The troopers didn't take long. On top of the stack of missile containers in place on the dolly, they added the container they'd already opened. Wires ran from one of the missiles into Wrench's helmet, which he held in his hands and peered into. The hasty bypass Wrench had accomplished seemed to have done the job; he had already reported that these prototype missiles had very simple control interfaces, a choice of targeting criteria, multiple detonation options... and no security, not too strange for weapons that were intended to be test-fired rather than used in the field.

Tooth's voice sounded in the Joram's headset. "Let's move out."

Joram nodded and continued down the corridor. He shoved his hands into his pockets, was slightly reassured by the grips of the blaster pistols, taken from the first two men they'd captured. He couldn't hear them, but he knew that Hash and Spade would be moving along several meters behind him, and then the rest, with Spots shoving the dolly as Wrench rode atop it, at the rear.

The corridor-tunnel sloped down gently. Joram put one hand against its wall. It was rough to the touch, and it vibrated, a sign that somewhere, not too close, heavy machinery was in use.

Ahead, he saw a familiar-looking device attached to the corridor ceiling. "Holocam," he whispered. The surveillance device was aimed his direction, and would be showing him now; soon enough, the first of the clone troopers would be in its range of vision.

"Get past it and disable it," came the whispered reply. "Everyone else, hold here. Joram, report when it's done."

Now he was Joram instead of Lieutenant. He didn't know whether to be pleased or miffed. He decided to be pleased. The troopers had developed enough initiative to rebel against an authority figure when their goals -- still military goals, goals in the interest of the Republic -- demanded. Now they were men, rather than pre-programmed drones... slaves.

A happy ending. Unless it got them killed. Got *him* killed.

He halted directly beneath the holocam, out of its range of vision. Disable it? How? He was not technically proficient like Wrench.

He pulled out one of his blaster pistols and smashed the holocam with three blows of its butt. "Disabled," he said. "Continuing onward."

In some security room somewhere, a holocam monitor would have gone dark. That was bad, something that would cause an alert security team to raise some sort of alarm, but it was still more innocuous than a half-squad of clone troopers materializing within the holocam's view.

A few steps more, and he could see that the corridor ahead became level and better lit. As Joram descended, he saw where the corridor ended. There were blast doors at the end, and something standing beside them--

He felt his insides freeze. It was a droid, taller than a man, glossy brown, with curved, massive limbs and components. Its two pairs of arm-blasters were aimed forward, toward Joram.

He'd seen holos of these things, one of the most dangerous varieties of battle droids manufactured. None of the troopers' blasters would be of any use against the thing. He managed to whisper, "Destroyer."

"How many?"

"One. N-n-n-no living security." The destroyer was not moving, not adjusting its aim as Joram approached... not yet.

"Slow your approach," the trooper said. Joram had a sudden presentment that it wasn't Tooth talking to him, but one of the others. "As slow as you can, but don't look suspicious. Tell us when you're 30 meters from it. Wrench, prep one, infrared targeting, heat signature of a combat droid instead of a human."

Gulping against sudden fear-nausea, Joram slowed his walk. He pulled his stolen identicard from a pocket, fiddled with it, turning it over and over, as if trying to remember which edge to present to the security slot he assumed would be in the door.

Still the destroyer didn't react.

"Ready," said one trooper. He wasn't sure who it was.

"Destroyer sighted," said another -- or perhaps the same one.

The destroyer became active, crouching, probably to give its sensory platform a better angle on what was happening further down the corridor, behind Joram.

"Joram, fall down," a trooper said.

Joram fell, as fast as he could compel his knees to give way, and it almost wasn't fast enough. There was a roar behind him, directly over him as he hit the duracrete floor. He saw the air around the destroyer shimmer as it activated its own defensive shields--

Then there was a brilliant flash, a howl of noise as though a moon-sized beast had just been gut-shot. Joram felt heat wash over him. A wall his dazzled eyes couldn't see hammered him, sent him skidding backward.

He lay there unmoving, his brain somehow not translating the orders of "Get up! Get away!" to his limbs, and then someone was swatting his back and legs.

"Hold on there, sir." The voice was a trooper's, dim and distant. "You're kind of on fire. It's almost out."

"Very kind of you," Joram managed. He managed to push himself upright and look down the corridor. As his dazzled sight recovered, he could see the corridor's end -- walls, ceiling, and floor scorched and blown away in chunks, filled with fiery remains of what had been a destroyer, the blast doors knocked off their rails.

There was a ringing in his ears that diminished when he pressed his headset tighter over his ears.

He was surrounded by clone troopers now, Hash and Spade ahead with blasters at the ready, Digger helping Joram to his feet, Wrench back on the dolly preparing another missile, Spots ready to shove the dolly forward. Wrench's armor was blackened all across the front surfaces, but the darkening seemed to be from smoke and soot rather than burn.

"That's an alarm," Digger said. "I think the stealth phase of our mission is at an end."

"Where's Tooth?"

Digger shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"What?"

"Move out. On the double." Digger gestured, and Hash and Spade headed forward at a trot. Joram stumbled along behind. Points on his arms and legs felt raw. He decided not to look at the burns.

Past the twisted wreckage of the blast doors was more corridor, but this had sliding doors at intervals. It was long enough to be indistinct at the far end. Joram could see figures rushing toward them from the far end. Closer, doors slid open. People stepped out, saw the clone troopers, and jumped back out of sight again. "Where to?" Digger asked.

"Final assembly area," Joram said. "Plants have different areas where the different components are made or stored, and then an area where the subassemblies are all put together. That's the most crucial part of the facility."

Digger stepped up. "But where's that going to be?"

"Somewhere that dolly can get to."

Someone in the distance opened fire with what sounded like a blaster pistol. Joram maneuvered to stand directly behind Hash and crouched there. He continued, "That means down this corridor or through that doorway there--" He pointed to a doublewide access about 20 meters down the corridor. "Those are the only two places the dolly can fit through."

"Forward," Digger said.

Hash and Spade, returning fire against the distant defenders, moved up to the wide doorway, Joram close behind Hash. Digger marched resolutely in front of the missile dolly, protecting its explosive cargo from incoming fire. Joram saw the trooper's chest armor blacken where it took a glancing hit, saw Digger stagger from the impact.

The door had turbolift controls to the side. Joram slapped the summon button. The doors didn't open immediately. "We may have to run a bypass--"

The doors opened. The cylindrical turbolift beyond had just one occupant, a man of slight build and graying hair -- and, as soon as he glimpsed the clone troopers, a frightened expression.

Joram grabbed him by the collar of his blue jumpsuit and drove him to the back of the lift tube, slamming him into the wall there. He jammed a blaster pistol into the man's gut. "Do you want to take us to the final assembly area, or do you want to die here?"

The man choked a moment, then said, "Two levels down. Card access only--"

"Does your identicard give *you* access?"

The man nodded and held the card up. A trooper extended an arm over Joram's shoulder and took the card. A moment later, the troopers were all in the turbolift, and it began its descent.

"Not bad, Joram," Digger said, obviously stifling a laugh. "Where'd you learn that, trooper training?"

"Oh, shut up."

A moment later, the lift tube doors opened. Blaster fire poured into the lift like sideways rain, tearing into Hash. Joram shoved himself and his prisoner aside as Digger, Spade, and Spots returned fire. Hash crashed to the lift floor and steam rose from the holes in his torso armor.

The clone troopers continued to fire. The incoming blasts trailed off and ceased. Digger spared a look at Hash, who was unmoving. "Spade, give him a look. Everyone else, move out."

They emerged into a large fabrication area -- Joram saw conveyor belts, mechanical hoists on ceiling tracks, huddled groups of jumpsuited workers, the remains of security agents and combat droids.

Wrench pointed toward a set of gleaming blue shelves on which were mechanical assemblies that looked like truncated cones. "Those are the same warheads as in the missiles."

Joram said, "The door beside it will be the access to the warhead storage or assembly area."

Digger nodded. "That's where we drop our second toy." He turned to the prisoner. "Are there stairwells or ramps out of here? Anything other than this turbolift?"

The man nodded.

"Use them to get out of here. Take these people. Everything's about to blow up." Digger gave the man a shove. "You have 60 seconds."

The man ran.

"Hash's dead, Digger."

"Thanks, Spade. Wrench--"

"I know what to do."

* * *

They brought the turbolift up to the level by which they'd entered, but didn't let the doors open.

Ten seconds later, the explosions began. The lift tube floor hammered at Joram's heels and a shudder ran through the lift.

Joram hit the open button. Smoke and heat poured in, and almost instantly Joram was blind and choking.

Someone grabbed his wrist and hauled. He was coughing, tripping over people, sometimes stumbling, sometimes being dragged. He heard blaster fire, the ringing noise it made when it hit metal doors, the thudding impacts it made against trooper armor, the hissing wail it made when it hit flesh and superheated organic tissues to the boiling point.

Then he was running and being dragged up a slope--they had to be on the inclined corridor out of the complex. More explosions sounded behind them. As his vision cleared, he could see more people around him, jumpsuited workers who stayed clear of the clone troopers.

Back in the big hangar bay, as factory workers streamed around them, hands half-raised as if to say "Don't shoot," their expressions fearful, Joram was able to suppress his coughing and take stock. Digger, Wrench, and Spots were still with him. "Hash and Spade?" he asked, his voice rough.

Digger shook his head. He handed Joram one of the fallen troopers' blaster rifles. "Ready to finish it?"

Joram checked the rifle's charge and held it at the ready. "I guess so."

* * *

Digger led the charge to the exit from the bay building. "Stand back!" he shouted. "Troopers coming through!"

Workers leaped away from them. There was fear on some of their faces, loathing on others. Oddly, Joram felt proud of that.

The exterior door, Joram saw, was open. He and the troopers positioned themselves beside it. "They're going to be waiting," Joram said. The floor trembled as another set of distant explosions began, and a thick black layer of smoke poured out of the bay along the ceiling of the antechamber.

"You bet they are," Digger said. "Emerging in three, two, one, zero--"

Digger turned into the open doorway. Joram expected him to be riddled with blaster fire as Hash had been, and there was the sudden roar of blaster weaponry -- but no laser blasts flashed in through the door.

Joram followed the clone troopers out at a dead run. The buildings around the bay were pocked with smoking blaster impact and a unit of battle droids, to the left, was mostly in pieces; those who remained functional were turning and firing in the wake of a clone trooper roaring off in that direction on a STAP. The trooper's rear end rested against an improvised webbing of cable, which kept him from falling off, and his leg was splinted, immobile.

Digger, Wrench, Spots, and Joram poured fire into the battle droids, finishing those that Mapper had not already destroyed. "This way," Digger said, and charged off around the curved wall of the hangar.

Incoming fire, from men or droids shooting from concealed position, grazed Spots and knocked Wrench down. Joram and Spots got Wrench on his feet and they continued forward at a stumbling pace while Digger returned fire. Ahead, the doorway into a smaller bay came into view -- and then exploded as someone approaching from the opposite direction fired on it with heavier ordnance.

Digger kept them moving forward. Seconds later, Mapper, on his STAP, flew through the ruined doorway. Joram and the other troopers were moments behind him.

The interior doorway from antechamber into hangar bay was already open, and beyond were the sleek, silvery lines of the yacht Joram had already prepped. "You know how to fly this, right?" Digger asked.

"It's a little late to be asking." Joram helped Mapper unhook the STAP's cable sling and slid into position under the trooper's arm. He helped the trooper to the yacht's open access hatch. "And, yes, I do."

* * *

Joram's hands didn't stop shaking until they cleared orbit. Starfield filled the yacht's forward viewports, a scene that Joram usually found lovely, beckoning. Now he was too tired to appreciate it. He began calculating and keying in their first hyperspace jump.

There had been no pursuit. "Why weren't we followed?" he asked Digger, who sat in the co-pilot's seat.

Digger, his helmet off, rubbed at tired-looking eyes. "The pursuit was drawn off."

"By what?"

"By Tooth. His job to take the other transport out and lead the starfighter support away from Tur Lorkin."

"Will he -- will he be joining us?"

Digger gave him a sympathetic look, but shook his head. "He was transmitting during his part of the mission. I heard him go down."

Joram sighed. He turned his attention back to the navigation computer. "He knew, didn't he? That his part of it would be a suicide mission."

"He knew."

"I'm sorry." A question occurred to Joram. He wrestled with it for a moment before daring to ask it. "What's it like for you? To lose someone you've known all your life, someone who, in so many ways, *is* you?"

"It's like being shot. Feeling the burn, not being able to breathe easily." Digger fixed him with his gaze. "What's it like for *you*? Losing someone you've worked with so closely, someone you've come to rely on?"

"I've never been shot. But I think it's the same."

They were silent for long moments, while Joram finished his astronavigational task. The yacht's hyperdrive warmed up for its first jump. Then Digger said, "There's something you ought to know."

"What's that?"

"We're not normal. My platoon. We were made to be, how'd they put it, a little more self-reliant than the others. To be capable of more initiative. There are some more out there like us. In case they need troopers for more specialized missions."

Joram thought about that. "So I was supposed to evaluate you, and assume you were the norm, and offer up a glowing report of the clone troopers' military value. To help persuade the powers that be that all troopers perform like elites."

"I guess so."

"I might as well do just that. It's never a good idea to foul up a cover-up until know what it's there for. But why did you tell me?"

"Because you deserved to know. Because you're one of us."

The words hung there, as they though they'd been fixed in the air by a holoprojector instead of spoken, until Joram activated the hyperdrive.